

Publication Name: THE GAZETTE

Publication Date: 04/11/2005 Headline: Amber Alert worked, with glitches

Byline: Christoph Trappe Section: A Page: 1

Amber Alert worked, with glitches

Officials seek answers for why all signs didn't flash warning

Christoph Trappe

CEDAR RAPIDS - Public safety officials say the March 24 Amber Alert issued about Jetseta Gage's disappearance was handled properly, but that a few aspects didn't work and that they learned a few things from the alert, the first ever issued in Cedar Rapids.

Ultimately, the alert worked because a woman - who has not been identified - heard on television that police were looking for the 10-year-old Cedar Rapids girl who'd left her home with Roger Paul Bentley, a 37-year-old Brandon man. The woman knew Bentley and had a hunch where he might be. The hunch - at an abandoned mobile home in rural Johnson County - proved correct, although it came too late.

Deputies arrested Bentley, a convicted sex offender, around 7 a.m. March 25 and, later that day, found Jetseta's body inside the mobile home. Bentley is charged with Jetseta's kidnapping and murder.

Some people have questioned why it took police two hours to issue the Amber Alert about the missing girl. It's a question police are ready to answer. "You've got to do an investigation," Cedar Rapids police

AMBER, PAGE 6A

Amber/Jetseta case met criteria

From 1A

Capt. Bernie Walther said. "If we start issuing an Amber Alert constantly, it starts losing its effect." On March 24, Jetseta's mother and grandmother called 911 to report her missing. Police arrived within minutes, searched the home and the neighborhood and interviewed the family and neighbors. Jetseta's 7-year-old brother, at some point, told his family or police that Jetseta had left with Bentley in his pickup. Officers determined Bentley is a convicted sex offender listed on the state's Sex Offender Registry. (The Gage family has said it did not know Bentley was on the registry.) Police then became convinced Jetseta was in danger and contacted the Department of Public Safety - the first step in getting an Amber Alert issued.

The alerts are not issued unless law enforcement officials believe a child - someone under age 18 - has been abducted and is in danger of serious harm or death. "It was obvious it met all the criteria for an Amber Alert," Iowa State Patrol Capt. Todd Misel wrote, summarizing a meeting he held last Thursday in Cedar Rapids with local officials involved in the case.

"You can't just (send out an alert) just because you think something happened," Misel said. "It's reserved for the most severe cases of child abductions. It's not for missing children but for abducted children." Amber Alert warnings in Iowa go out just like tornado warnings. The Department of Public Safety notifies the National Weather Service, which sends information to radio and television stations.

The alerts also are supposed to appear on interstate signs in metro areas. Those signs - straddling interstates in Des Moines, Cedar Rapids and Davenport - flashed the Amber Alert only in Davenport, a problem the Iowa Department of Transportation told The Gazette it would be studying and fixing. Also,

the alert about Jetseta and Bentley did not appear on at least one Iowa Lottery machine until 5 a.m. March 25, more than five hours after it was issued, Misel said. Lottery machines, like those found in most supermarkets and convenience stores, are supposed to flash Amber Alerts on screens the public can see. Lottery officials are trying to figure out what happened, he said. Another problem: An estimated 800 phone calls came in to Cedar Rapids police after the Amber Alert, Walther said. Some people called with tips. A lot of the calls, though, were from media outlets across the nation, filling the department spokesman's voice mailbox in minutes. Once the mailbox was full, media representatives started calling other Police Department lines. "We didn't realize the amount of calls (this would generate) from national media outlets," Police Chief Mike Klappholz said.

If another Amber Alert is issued in the future, he said, more people will be called in to answer media calls and to assist with answering other major phone lines in the department. Police Department personnel, the chief added, did a good job working together, but "unfortunately, a little girl died."

Amber Alert timeline

March 24

- 8:15 p.m. - Jetseta Gage is last seen at her home at 448 Jacolyn Dr. NW, Cedar Rapids.
- 8:47 p.m. - Trena and Teresa Gage, Jetseta's mother and grandmother, call 911.
- 8:48 p.m. - Officers are dispatched.
- 8:52 p.m. - First officer arrives at Gage home.
- 8:52 to 10:56 p.m. - Officers search the house and neighborhood, interview people and perform other investigative tasks.
- 10:56 p.m. - Police ask the Iowa Department of Public Safety to issue an Amber Alert for Jetseta and Roger Paul Bentley.
- 11:47 p.m. - National Weather Service activates Amber Alert.

March 25

- 12:41 a.m. - Amber Alert Web site ([www.iowaamber alert.org](http://www.iowaamberalert.org)) lists the alert.

Criteria

- Law enforcement follow these criteria to determine whether an Amber Alert should be issued:
- Law enforcement officers confirm a child has been abducted.
- The child is under age 18.
- Law enforcement officers believe circumstances indicate the child is in danger of serious bodily harm or death.
- There is enough descriptive information about the child, the suspect and/or the suspect's vehicle to believe an immediate broadcast alert will help.

Source: State of Iowa

Shelle Havelick

Gazette Circulation

(319) 368-8820

(800) 397-8333 ext 8820

shelle.havelick@gazettecommunications.com